

VZCZCXRO0996
RR RUEHDT RUEHPB
DE RUEHBD #0088/01 0710514
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 110514Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4127
INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000088

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [ASEAN](#) [BX](#)
SUBJECT: BRUNEIAN VIEWS OF ASEAN'S FUTURE

REF: 07 Singapore 2085

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Brunei's First and Second Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Trade have outlined a broad vision for ASEAN emphasizing the creation of a regional identity via actions that directly address the day-to-day problems of the population in member states. They appear to see ASEAN integration as a process best driven through the "soft power" of the "Socio-Cultural Community" created by the new ASEAN Charter, rather than the "hard power" of the "Political-Security" or "Economic" communities that the Charter also establishes. Their views may be motivated in part by recognition that ASEAN has not proven very adept at solving thorny political or economic problems through the application of "hard power," leaving "soft power" as the only currently viable option for building a regional identity among ASEAN's populace. END SUMMARY.

Discussion in Singapore

¶2. (U) The Brunei Economic Development board sponsored the initial "Brunei Forum" in Singapore from February 19-20. The Forum was designed primarily to market Brunei to potential Singaporean investors and trading partners, and so focused primarily on economic issues. In addition, however, it provided a venue for the First and Second Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Prince Mohamed Bolkiah and Pehin Lim Jock Seng, to discuss their thinking on ASEAN's future priorities now that the organization is entering a new phase of its existence with the signing of the ASEAN Charter.

The Search for Common Ground

¶3. (U) In his delivery of the inaugural "Southeast Asian Lecture" which opened the Forum, Prince Mohamed stressed the need for ASEAN to undertake "real action" that was relevant to the ordinary lives of people in its member states. He explained that he was not looking for the issuance of more "Roadmaps," "Development Plans," or "Blueprints" that ASEAN produced so prolifically. Instead, and without citing any specifics, he called for action that "helps ordinary people directly with their day-to-day problems" and could help build a "real" sense of an ASEAN community.

¶4. (U) Prince Mohamed warned that it was not enough to hope for this sense of community to develop naturally out of members' implementation of the ASEAN Charter. Instead,

ASEAN's ten members states, representing "at least half a dozen different systems of government" and people of many faiths, needed to identify a "common ground" of issues that addressed the practical concerns of the region's population. That, he believed, was the only way to produce "the kind of community that all 500 million of our people understand and believe in," and so provide a vision for ASEAN's future.

Giving ASEAN "The Human Touch"

¶5. (U) Pehin Lim picked up on this theme and went slightly beyond Prince Mohamed's generalities while participating in a subsequent panel on "Brunei in ASEAN." Recalling the ASEAN-led "cocktail party" diplomacy of the late 1980's aimed at finding a political settlement in Cambodia, Lim said that for him this had been the glue that gave ASEAN a "sense of purpose" and helped it to gel into an effective organization. Member states were now asking themselves what would perform a similar function today. Signing the ASEAN Charter, he believed, was a necessary step but only the start of the process of answering this question. In the short term, it would also be desirable for the ASEAN Secretary General to become a leader who articulated and

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implemented a region-wide vision, and move beyond the current situation in which he was "only a secretary, not a general." To that end, Pehin Lim raised the idea of a one dollar per passenger ASEAN-wide airport departure tax to provide an independent funding source for Secretariat programs.

¶6. (U) Lim argued that in the longer term ASEAN should

BANDAR SER 00000088 002 OF 002

heed Prince Mohamed's call to build a sense of regional community from the bottom up by pursuing programs that touched people's lives on a daily basis. As an example, he proposed developing a region-wide common curriculum for ASEAN studies to give the younger generation a sense of shared Southeast Asian history. Other ideas might be the creation of an ASEAN University, or region-wide media outlets; responding to a suggestion from the audience, he added environmental protection campaigns to his list. The common theme, he stressed, was that ASEAN needed "the human touch." Asked by the Ambassador (who was in Singapore to meet U.S. companies at the Singapore Air Show, but also attended sessions of the Brunei Forum) to suggest a bumper-sticker slogan for ASEAN that would define its vision and rally its young people to such new regional institutions, Lim offered "Toward a Peaceful, Prosperous, and Caring Southeast Asian Community."

COMMENT: Is Soft Power ASEAN's Only Real Alternative?

¶7. (SBU) Although Pehin Lim's slogan encompasses the first two "Community Councils" set up under Article 9 of the new ASEAN Charter (reftel) -- "Political-Security" and "Economic" -- both he and Prince Mohamed appeared most interested in activities that would fall under the third institutional leg, the "Socio-Cultural Community Council." At first glance it seems puzzling that this would be the stance adopted by the representatives of ASEAN's only absolute monarchy, whose jobs do not depend on meeting popular expectations or winning elections. Upon reflection, it may simply be that they chose to emphasize the "soft power" of the "Socio-Cultural Community" because they recognize ASEAN has not proven very adept at applying the "hard power" necessary to solve thorny political or economic issues such as the political conflict in Burma or the rapid creation of a true internal market. This "soft

power" approach will have its own challenges (it is difficult, for example, to picture Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei agreeing on a common history text covering the 1960's Konfrontasi), but it may be the path of least resistance for those who would strive to build a true regional identity among ASEAN's populace.
END COMMENT.

SKODON